

# NĪTI IN MOTION: FEMINIST ETHICS AND MORAL DIPLOMACY IN THE RAMCHARIT MANAS

Dr. Vatsala Shoukla

Assistant Professor, Research Centre for Women's Studies, SNT Women's University,  
Mumbai

[vatsala\\_kat@yahoo.co.in](mailto:vatsala_kat@yahoo.co.in)

## ABSTRACT

This paper explores *nīti in motion*—a feminist and decolonial reading of *nīti* as a dynamic ethic of moral diplomacy, as portrayed in the *Sundarkāṇḍ* of the *Rāmcharitmanas*. Rather than viewing *nīti* as a static code, the study foregrounds its context-sensitive application in moments of ethical tension, embodied by figures like Hanumān, Mandodarī, and Vibhīṣaṇa. Through close readings of key episodes—the encounter with Maināk Parvat, Mandodarī's counsel to Rāvaṇa, Vibhīṣaṇa's moral dissent, the prayerful sea crossing, and humane treatment of envoys—the paper uncovers an Indic framework of ethical statecraft.

Juxtaposing these narratives with feminist international relations and contemporary diplomacy, the paper demonstrates how the *Rāmcharitmanas* articulates a model rooted in care, restraint, and accountability. The *Sundarkāṇḍ* challenges masculinist notions of sovereignty by elevating emotional intelligence, truthfulness, and moral courage as political virtues. Combining textual analysis with ethical reflection, the study asks: How do these characters model relational diplomacy? What insights do they offer for feminist international thought? Ultimately, *nīti in motion* emerges as a transformative praxis that reimagines diplomacy through indigenous ethics, feminist care, and dialogical engagement—offering timely lessons for global politics today.

Keywords: Nīti (Indic ethical statecraft); Cultural diplomacy; Decolonial political thought; Feminist international relations; Ramcharitmanas and conflict ethics; Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS)

## I. INTRODUCTION

The *Rāmcharitmanas*, composed by Goswami Tulsidas in the sixteenth century, is not only a foundational text of Bhakti literature but also a rich repository of Indic ethical and political thought. Among its seven kāṇḍas (books), the *Sundarkāṇḍ* stands out for its vivid narration of Hanumān's journey to Laṅkā and its profound reflections on moral conduct, diplomatic engagement, and the exercise of power in times of crisis. This paper centers the *Sundarkāṇḍ* as a critical site for reimagining *nīti*—commonly translated as the art of moral and strategic governance—not as a static or prescriptive code, but as a context-responsive, relational, and dynamic praxis: *nīti in motion*.

By tracing how characters such as Hanumān, Mandodarī, and Vibhīṣaṇa navigate ethical dilemmas, emotional tensions, and the complexities of loyalty and dissent, the study

reveals an indigenous model of moral diplomacy that privileges care, restraint, truthfulness, and moral courage. These narrative moments are not incidental; they constitute a coherent ethical architecture that stands in contrast to dominant paradigms of diplomacy grounded in force, realpolitik, or transactional interests.

In engaging this Indic ethical tradition through a feminist lens, the paper poses the following questions: How do the actions and words of these key characters embody evolving ideas of moral responsibility, particularly in the context of conflict and asymmetrical power? What does it mean to pursue diplomacy grounded in emotional intelligence, empathy, and dialogical engagement? And how might these frameworks challenge masculinist and colonial constructs of sovereignty, statehood, and international conduct?

These inquiries are situated within the broader framework of feminist international relations, which critiques the patriarchal, hierarchical assumptions that underlie much of modern diplomacy and global governance (Tickner, 1992; Enloe, 2004). Feminist diplomacy re-centers values such as care, mutual respect, accountability, and non-violence—qualities that are vividly present in the ethical fabric of the *Sundarkāṇḍ* but often sidelined in mainstream IR discourse (Aggestam & Towns, 2019; Mohanty, 2003).

The objectives of this study are threefold. First, to conduct a close textual and hermeneutic analysis of selected episodes—Hanumān’s respectful dialogue with Maināk Parvat, Mandodarī’s counsel to Rāvaṇa, and Vibhīṣaṇa’s principled dissent—to uncover an Indic model of moral diplomacy. Second, to bring this model into conversation with feminist ethical and diplomatic thought, thereby demonstrating its contemporary relevance. Third, to propose *nīti in motion* as an embodied, non-linear, and context-sensitive ethic that can offer powerful alternatives to prevailing models of governance and conflict resolution.

Through this interdisciplinary approach—blending textual interpretation, feminist ethics, and political theory—this paper articulates a decolonial vision of diplomacy rooted in Indic knowledge traditions. In foregrounding care, empathy, moral restraint, and relational accountability, *nīti in motion* emerges as a timely and necessary framework for rethinking diplomacy in a world increasingly shaped by crisis, inequality, and fractured sovereignties.

## II. METHOD

This study employs a qualitative, interpretive methodology combining textual hermeneutics and comparative ethical analysis. Key episodes from the *Sundarkāṇḍ* of the *Rāmcharitmanas* are analyzed through close reading, with attention to language, ethical positioning, and narrative context. These readings are brought into dialogue with feminist international relations theory and decolonial political thought, allowing for a cross-cultural ethical reflection. The approach foregrounds *nīti* not as a static doctrine, but as a lived and context-responsive praxis, enabling a grounded exploration of alternative models of diplomacy rooted in Indian knowledge systems.

## III. FINDING AND DISCUSSION

This section unfolds the interpretive core of the paper by weaving together textual insights, theoretical reflections, and cultural implications. It begins with a close reading of the *Sundarkāṇḍ*, drawing attention to how *nīti*—as ethical statecraft—emerges not as a rigid doctrine but as a responsive, situated practice. This is followed by a discussion on how these embodied narratives align with feminist ethics and decolonial approaches to diplomacy, offering a counterpoint to dominant paradigms in International Relations. The final sub-section explores the implications of these insights for feminist praxis, especially in the realm of cultural diplomacy, suggesting how such frameworks may inform a more compassionate, plural, and context-attuned global engagement.

### 3.1. Embodying Nīti in Motion — Textual Readings from The Sundarkāṇḍ

The *Sundarkāṇḍ* offers a compelling narrative terrain where *nīti*—ethical statecraft rooted in wisdom, compassion, and moral courage—is enacted through dialogical encounters, dissenting voices, and non-violent resistance. Far from being abstract doctrine, *nīti* in these episodes is embodied, mobile, and deeply relational. The protagonists—Hanumān, Vibhīṣaṇa, and Mandodarī—model a diplomacy that counters hegemonic masculinist paradigms with an ethics of restraint, humility, and truth-speaking.

#### 3.1.1. Hanumān’s Purposeful Restraint: The Encounter with Maināk Parvat

As Hanumān begins his airborne journey to Laṅkā, Maināk Parvat rises from the ocean to offer him rest. Hanumān responds:

"Rām kāju kīnhe binu mohi kahān bishrām."

*“Without fulfilling Rām’s work, how can I even consider resting?” (Sundarkāṇḍ 1)*

Here, Hanumān practices strategic self-limitation—thanking Maināk but declining rest. His ethic is not asceticism for its own sake but purposeful prioritization, showcasing diplomacy anchored in clarity of mission, humility, and discipline. It anticipates a model of *nīti* where emotional intelligence and focus outweigh brute assertion.

#### 3.1.2. Hanumān’s Wit and Tactical Adaptability: Encounters with Surasā and Laṅkā

On his journey, Hanumān meets Surasā, a goddess who tests him by demanding to swallow him. Rather than confront her forcefully, he deploys wit and agility:

"Jas jas Surasā badanu badhāvā, tasu dūn Kapi rūp dekhāvā."

Sat yojan tehi ānan kīnhā, ati laghu rūp Pavanāsut līnhā."

*“As Surasā widened her mouth, Hanumān grew even larger. Then, when her mouth reached ten yojanas, he suddenly took a tiny form.” (Sundarkāṇḍ 1/5)*

This episode illustrates *yukti* (strategic wisdom) as integral to *nīti*. Hanumān avoids unnecessary aggression, using proportion, humor, and agility to achieve his goal. Similarly, later in Laṅkā, when his tail is set on fire, he does not retaliate violently. Instead:

"Pāvaka jarat dekhi Hanumantā, bhayau param laghu rūp turantā."

"*Seeing his tail burn, Hanumān instantly assumed an extremely small form.*" (*Sundarkāṇḍ* 24/4)

These moments collectively foreground *non-violent intelligence*—power exercised through finesse rather than force. Feminist and indigenous perspectives on diplomacy often emphasize such embodied wisdom, where self-restraint and situational awareness are higher virtues than domination.

### 3.1.3. Vibhīṣaṇa's Ethical Dissent: Challenging Injustice from Within

When Rāvaṇa captures Hanumān, Vibhīṣaṇa stands up for righteous conduct:

"Nāi sīs kari binay bahutā, nīti virodh na māriha dūtā."

"*He bowed and pleaded humbly; by ethics, one must not kill a messenger.*" (*Sundarkāṇḍ* 23/4)

This defense of Hanumān, grounded in both śāstric principle and humane concern, is an appeal to the dignity of dialogical exchange—even in conflict. Later, Vibhīṣaṇa pleads again:

"Tāt charan gahi māgau rākhu mor dular,

Sītā dehu Rām, kahūnā hit na hoy tumhār."

"*I clasp your feet and plead, dear brother—return Sītā to Rām; retaining her brings you no benefit.*" (*Sundarkāṇḍ* 40)

These verses highlight dissent not as betrayal but as *moral courage*. Vibhīṣaṇa's diplomacy is affective and principled—a form of ethical leadership often silenced in dominant narratives. His voice exemplifies the kind of *transformative dissent* valued in feminist IR, where loyalty is redefined through care for justice.

### 3.1.4. Mandodarī's Counsel: A Feminine Ethic of Political Responsibility

Mandodarī's role in the *Sundarkāṇḍ* is subtle but profound. Disturbed by ominous signs and public murmurs, she approaches Rāvaṇa:

"Dutinhā san suni purajan bānī, Mandodarī adhik ākulānī.

Rahasi jori kar pati pag lāgī, boli bachan nīti ras pāgī."

*“Hearing the citizens’ fearful talk about the messenger, Mandodarī grew deeply anxious. In private, she joined her hands, touched her husband’s feet, and spoke words steeped in the essence of ethics.” (Sundarkāṇḍ 35/2–3)*

Mandodarī speaks from a place of relational ethics—not out of weakness, but out of foresight, empathy, and concern for the kingdom’s future. Though constrained by patriarchy, her counsel represents *feminine reasoning* in the political realm—intuitive, rooted, and wise. She voices what modern diplomacy often ignores: that care, community feedback, and moral foresight are essential components of just governance.

### **3.1.5. Vibhīṣaṇa’s Advice to Rām: Humility before Power**

Even after joining Rām’s camp, Vibhīṣaṇa continues to uphold *nīti*:

"Kah Lankes sunahu Raghunayak, koti sindhu soshak tav sāyak.

Jadyapi tadapi nīti asi gāyī, binay kariha sāgar san jāyī."

*“O King of Raghu! Your arrows can dry countless oceans. Yet even so, ethics prescribes: first make a humble plea to the ocean.” (Sundarkāṇḍ 49/4)*

This is a powerful articulation of ethical sequencing. Even when capable of absolute power, a sovereign must choose humility and dialogue first. Vibhīṣaṇa’s advice echoes a dhārmic diplomacy in which might is tempered by wisdom, and victory is pursued through righteousness, not dominance.

### **3.1.6. Nīti as a Living Ethic**

In the *Sundarkāṇḍ*, *nīti* is neither abstract nor gender-neutral. It is relational, dynamic, and often expressed by those on the moral periphery—messengers, dissenters, women. Hanumān’s tact, Vibhīṣaṇa’s dissent, and Mandodarī’s counsel form an Indic moral imaginary where diplomacy is grounded in restraint, accountability, and truth. These voices invite us to rethink contemporary paradigms of power: to see *nīti* not as control but as care, not as manipulation but as meaningful dialogue.

## **3.2. Feminist Ethics and Decolonial Diplomacy — Theoretical Resonances**

The textual readings from the *Sundarkāṇḍ* do not merely offer literary or religious insight; they illuminate a deeply grounded epistemology of diplomacy that is both feminist in ethic and decolonial in orientation. Far from a patriarchal framework of state sovereignty based on domination and violence, these narratives reconfigure diplomacy as embodied, relational, dialogical, and affective. They resonate with critical feminist IR theorists and decolonial

scholars who have long challenged the masculinist and Eurocentric foundations of modern international law and diplomacy.

### **3.2.1. From Heroic Masculinity to Relational Ethics**

Hanumān's strategic restraint, Vibhīṣaṇa's dissent, and Mandodarī's persuasive counsel collectively rupture the dominant logic of IR that privileges hegemonic masculinity—where aggression, conquest, and instrumental rationality define diplomacy. In contrast, these episodes embody an ethic of emotional intelligence, care-based decision-making, and moral persuasion.

This aligns closely with feminist IR scholar Carol Cohn, who critiques the “technostrategic” language of security and calls for an ethics of care, vulnerability, and empathy in global politics (Cohn, 1987; 2013). Similarly, Fiona Robinson (1999, 2011) advocates for a “care ethics of international relations,” moving away from abstract justice to relationships of mutual dependence and moral responsibility.

The *Sundarkāṇḍ* mirrors such an ethic. Hanumān's refusal to engage in violence unless absolutely necessary, and Vibhīṣaṇa's insistence on moral conduct even during war, illustrate “diplomacy as care,” not coercion.

### **3.2.2. Dissent as a Mode of Ethical Agency**

Vibhīṣaṇa and Mandodarī's dissent from within the structures of Rāvaṇa's Laṅkā introduces a feminist reading of internal critique as transformative diplomacy. Their interventions are not framed as acts of disloyalty but as deeply ethical disruptions, grounded in the protection of collective well-being and the dharmic order.

This mode of dissent resonates with Jacqui True's (2012) feminist security theory, which emphasizes that security must be understood from the margins, accounting for the everyday lives of vulnerable populations. Similarly, Tickner's (1992, 2005) feminist IR insists that diplomacy must be attentive to voices excluded from power, including those of women, non-combatants, and ethical dissenters.

By affirming dissent as dharmic and necessary, the *Sundarkāṇḍ* subverts the Westphalian notion of absolute state sovereignty and reclaims diplomacy as a moral-political practice grounded in accountability and truth-telling.

### **3.2.3. Embodied and Affective Diplomacy in Hanumān's Movements**

Hanumān's encounters with Maināk, Surasā, and Lankinī mark a journey of affective negotiation, where his shifting forms symbolize a diplomacy of adaptability and

intersubjectivity. He modulates his body and presence not to deceive but to accommodate, persuade, and avoid unnecessary violence.

Kimberly Hutchings (2000, 2018) and Laura Sjoberg (2013) argue that diplomacy should not be understood as disembodied rational calculus but as deeply embodied, gendered, and emotional. Hanumān exemplifies this in his shifting bodily tactics and his respect for each encounter—blending strategy with emotion, empathy with firmness.

In this light, the *Sundarkāṇḍ* offers a proto-feminist vision of diplomacy, where power is rooted in bodily wisdom and moral clarity, not domination.

### 3.2.4. Decolonial Reclaiming of Normative Frameworks

Reading the *Sundarkāṇḍ* through a decolonial lens allows us to challenge the Eurocentric assumptions that define modern diplomacy and international law. The episodes demonstrate Indigenous epistemes of justice, ethics, and relational diplomacy that predate and exceed the frameworks of European Enlightenment or colonial treaties.

Walter Mignolo (2011) and Catherine Walsh (2018) call for epistemic disobedience—the right to think, govern, and relate otherwise. The *Sundarkāṇḍ* offers precisely such a model: a decolonial *nīti* where ethical wisdom is grounded in *lokavidyā* (people’s knowledge), not bureaucratic lawfare.

In Hanumān’s refusal to use violence, Vibhīṣaṇa’s allegiance to justice over kin, and Mandodarī’s relational counsel, we see a refusal to mimic the hypermasculine, Hobbesian order of global politics. Instead, we find an Indic grammar of diplomacy rooted in *saha-dharma*—co-existence and responsibility.

### 3.2.5. Contemporary Frameworks: Relevance to UN and International Law

Many of these insights find resonances, even if partial and implicit, in contemporary international norms and human rights frameworks:

- UN Charter, Article 33 emphasizes the primacy of peaceful means—negotiation, mediation, arbitration—before force. This mirrors Vibhīṣaṇa’s advice to approach the ocean (*Sundarkāṇḍ* 49/4), underscoring humility even when power is available.
- UN Security Council Resolution 1325 (2000) on Women, Peace, and Security foregrounds women’s participation, protection, and leadership in peacebuilding. Mandodarī’s intervention offers a mytho-historical precedent for such feminine diplomatic agency.
- Declaration on the Right to Peace (UNGA, 2016) calls upon states to resolve conflicts through dialogue and mutual understanding, which is precisely what Hanumān practices with Surasā and even with Laṅkā’s gatekeepers.

- The Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations (1961) protects diplomatic envoys from harm, aligning with Vibhīṣaṇa’s protest against killing the messenger (*nīti virodh na māriha dūtā*).

What the *Sundarkāṇḍ* episodes offer is not a prescriptive legalistic model but an ethical horizon—a civilizational template of how power may be exercised through care, truth, and mutual dignity. In this, it speaks not only to feminist IR but also to current multilateral efforts struggling to reconcile law with justice, and policy with peace.

### 3.2.6. Toward a Dhārmic-Feminist Cosmopolitics

The ethics articulated in the *Sundarkāṇḍ* align with a feminist and decolonial vision of world order, where diplomacy is not the monopoly of states but a shared moral practice across diverse agents.

In placing these episodes in dialogue with feminist IR and international law, we recover an Indic legacy of ethical diplomacy that resonates with current global aspirations for sustainable peace, gender justice, and equitable power-sharing. As India navigates its 21st-century identity as a civilizational state, recovering such rooted models of *nīti* can inform a cosmopolitics of care—one that challenges colonial inheritances and embodies dignity in global affairs.

## 3.3. Toward Feminist Praxis – Cultural Diplomacy

While earlier sections examined *nīti* as a dynamic ethical practice and engaged feminist and decolonial diplomatic theories, this section shifts toward praxis—specifically, the role of cultural diplomacy in operationalizing *nīti in motion* within feminist international relations. It reflects on how India’s civilizational knowledge systems and epic narratives, especially the *Sundarkāṇḍ*, can inform a distinctive feminist cultural diplomacy grounded in care, ethical engagement, and dialogical exchange.

### 3.3.1. Cultural Texts as Ethical Diplomatic Resources

Cultural diplomacy is often reduced to aesthetic representation or national branding. However, when understood through a feminist and decolonial lens, it becomes a moral strategy of engagement (Sabaratnam, 2011; Parashar, 2013). The *Sundarkāṇḍ* provides narrative resources that enable such a shift. Hanumān’s refusal to rest until his mission for Rāma is complete—“Rām kaju kinhe binu mohi kahān vishrām”—signals a profound ethic of purposeful service over egoistic gratification. This model encourages an approach to diplomacy not as competition but as ethical obligation toward the larger good, echoing feminist calls for responsibility and solidarity in global politics (Tickner, 1992; Aggestam & Towns, 2019).

### 3.3.2. Women’s Agency in Epic and Diplomacy

Mandodarī’s ethically charged speech to Rāvaṇa, “*Bolī bachan nīti ras pāgī*” (*Sundarkāṇḍ* 35/3), is not only an act of domestic advice, but a moment of moral intervention.

Her voice stands as a counterpoint to hypermasculine power, echoing feminist IR's emphasis on moral persuasion and ethical dissent (Enloe, 2004; Shepherd, 2017). In modern diplomacy, this finds resonance in the UN Women, Peace, and Security agenda (UNSCR 1325), which advocates for women's meaningful participation in conflict resolution, peacekeeping, and diplomacy. Feminist diplomacy, then, must not only advocate for more women at the table but must also transform the language and ethics of diplomacy itself.

### 3.3.3. Enacting Indic Feminist Cultural Diplomacy

A feminist cultural diplomacy rooted in *nīti* can take several tangible forms:

- **Narrative Diplomacy:** Initiatives that elevate ethical readings of epics, showcasing figures like Sītā, Mandodarī, and Vibhīṣaṇa as diplomatic actors, not mythical ornaments.
- **Translocal Women's Dialogues:** Creating cross-border conversations among women leaders, scholars, and peacebuilders informed by shared ethical frameworks, including Indic traditions.
- **Educational Diplomacy:** Integrating *Sundarkāṇḍ*-based ethical modules in diplomatic training programs, inspired by feminist pedagogy and IKS (Indian Knowledge Systems).
- **Institutional Mechanisms:** Establishing cultural envoy programs for women rooted in indigenous traditions of ethical engagement; curating international exhibitions and literary dialogues that center empathy, care, and resistance to injustice.

Such efforts resonate with feminist IR's emphasis on transforming diplomacy from within—*not only who speaks, but how and with what ethics* (Sylvester, 2002; True, 2013). They also align with decolonial efforts to reclaim indigenous frameworks of negotiation, alliance-building, and care-driven governance (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018).

In concise this section proceeds from the literary and philosophical into the field of global policy and action, demonstrating that *nīti*—when viewed through a feminist lens—is not just a contemplative principle but a realistic, necessary alternative to militarized, masculinist diplomacy. It urges a reparative turn in international politics, one that centers moral courage, empathy, and cultural wisdom as diplomatic virtues—not vulnerabilities.

## IV. CONCLUSION

This paper set out to reframe the *Sundarkāṇḍ* not merely as a devotional or literary text, but as a profound reservoir of ethical-political wisdom—one that offers an indigenous and gender-sensitive reimaging of diplomacy. Through close readings of Hanumān's unwavering sense of purpose, Vibhīṣaṇa's moral interventions, and Mandodarī's counsel rooted in *nīti ras*, we uncovered a tradition of ethical reasoning, dialogical courage, and care-centered decision-making often eclipsed in dominant paradigms of statecraft.

By engaging feminist international relations and decolonial ethical frameworks, this paper reinterpreted *nīti* not as a static rulebook but as a context-responsive, relational praxis of power. The *Sundarkāṇḍ*, in this reading, becomes a site where diplomacy is neither brute strategy nor elite performance, but a moral responsibility animated by empathy, humility, and wisdom—qualities central to feminist ethics. It challenges masculinist doctrines of sovereignty and force, proposing instead a mode of engagement where restraint, moral clarity, and concern for the other hold diplomatic value.

This rethinking is not nostalgic, but necessary. In an age of persistent conflict, global crises, and rising authoritarianisms, the need for an ethic of dialogue and care has never been more urgent. The *Sundarkāṇḍ*, read through a feminist-decolonial lens, enables us to expand the ethical vocabulary of diplomacy, foregrounding figures—mythic, feminine, and culturally rooted—who model alternatives to coercive power.

Moreover, the implications are practical. Through a cultural diplomacy anchored in feminist praxis, India has the potential to offer not just economic or geopolitical leadership but civilizational moral leadership—contributing to global diplomacy frameworks that honor non-Western epistemologies and center ethical plurality.

In sum, this paper has argued for *nīti* in motion—a dynamic, feminist ethic of diplomacy drawn from Indic texts—as both an intellectual project and a policy imperative. It calls for a diplomacy that listens, cares, and dares to act morally—not despite power, but as its most meaningful expression.

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